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HOW SHAKESPEARE'S SKULL WAS AND FOUND.

BY A WARWICKSHIRE MAN.



"A HUMAN SKULL, I BOUGHT IT PASSING CHEAP
OF COURSE 'T WAS DEARER TO ITS FIRST EMPLOYER;
I THOUGHT MORTALITY DID WELL TO KEEP
SOME MUTE MEMENTO OF THE OLD DESTROYER."

ONE SHILLING.

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HOW SHAKESPEARE'S SKULL WAS¹⁹² STOLEN AND FOUND.

BY
A WARWICKSHIRE MAN.

A human skull! I bought it passing cheap;
Of course 'twas dearer to its first employer.
I thought Mortality did well to keep
Some mute memento of the old Destroyer.

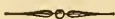
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*HOW SHAKESPEARE'S SKULL
WAS STOLEN.*

HOW SHAKESPEARE'S SKULL WAS STOLEN.

CIRCA 1794.



CHAPTER I.

THE ORIGIN OF THE PLOT.

I SELDOM pass the sleepy-looking 'Bear' Inn, originally the 'Bear and Ragged Staff' (the cognizance of a branch of the Warwick family, who lived at Beauchamp's Court near here), in the town of Alcester, without calling to mind a remarkable interview which took place some eighty years ago in connection with the front room on the right-hand side of that quaint Jacobean entrance. And now that Mr. M., the only person likely to be affected by this disclosure, has passed away at the age of seventy-five, I no longer feel hesitation in transcribing from rough notes and memoranda made and collected by him, a series of facts which may startle all those who, like myself, reverence the very dust of the immortal bard.

That Shakespeare's skull was stolen admits, I think, of very little doubt; yet I must not anticipate, but

endeavour to trace 'this strange eventful history' from its beginning.

The uncle of the late Mr. M., a youth who bore the name of Frank Chambers, was placed with a medical man (the only one practising in Alcester) about the year 1787. He was a wild, rather dashing young fellow ; not bad-looking, if a portrait taken in after years be evidence ; and, coming straight from attendance at a London hospital, found the exclusive society of a small town uncongenial, and its restraints irksome. Owing to a certain mild escapade—the manuscript alleges that it was nothing more heinous than a practical joke upon the curate in charge at the tumble-down old rectory—he found it convenient to leave Alcester and to go abroad ; and as Englishmen did not then dream of a trip to America or to Australia, his wanderings were confined to France. The heart of the French nation was then beginning to throb with the feverish heat of revolution, and 'gentlemen of the pavé' had already defined liberty on the 'lucus a non lucendo' principle.

Frank Chambers, like Arthur Young, was a strict observer of the national moral bankruptcy, and three of his letters from Rheims show that he was not deceived, like some greater minds among his own countrymen, by the tendency of thought and action in France at that remarkable period. When one hundred thousand Frenchmen were compelled by the murderous

hatred of an ignorant mob, and by the destruction of their stately châteaux, to flee in haste, there was 'no room of safety' for a son of perfide Albion. Frank returned to England, during what year I know not, but in a letter written from London without date, he mentions the exceptional severity of the winter, which probably was that of 1791.

Again he came to Alcester, and, assisting his former employer, was well known in the neighbourhood as a jovial, light-hearted fellow.

Two or three years pass without record, until he mentions the arrival of Lord William Seymour on a visit to his brother, Lord Hertford, at Ragley Hall, a splendid mansion overlooking, like a haughty custodian, the quiet little town.

Frank Chambers became acquainted with Lord William, although there could be little fellowship between the harsh, penurious, and eccentric habits of his lordship and those of the incipient surgeon. But the intimacy was of this advantage to the latter: that it proved the introduction to the excellent and sometimes notable company which the newly-created marquis gathered round him at rare intervals at his Warwickshire seat. It also leads to that startling adventure which until now has been as secret as the grave.

I have more than once questioned the late Mr. M. as to its precise date, but he assured me that, although his uncle kept a rough diary at intervals, half professional,

half domestic—extracts from which are before me, wherein even such trivial matters are entered as : ‘ Aug. 4th. Rode over to the “ Love Cup,” at Alne, where I had a quart of Barlum perry. Saw Jim Morris ; he has a fine colt at the Mill pasture.’ ‘ March 8th. Drove the doctor to a consultation with Dr. Brandis at Hinley’ (query, Henley-in-Arden)—the year is seldom given, or even the month.

He seems, however, to have taken some pains in recording observations made by men of mark at Lord Hertford’s table, and found especial pleasure in describing the good things with which that table was furnished, mixing, as in Tom Hood’s sonnet, sauce and sentiment with concise impartiality. Thus he writes : ‘ When Garrick was at Ragley, some years ago, Lord Hertford says that he gave a comical performance in the steward’s room for the amusement of the servants and others ; and he told his host afterwards that one of the audience was as —— hard to unlace as the old Speaker —— (the name is illegible), for when the folks were shaking with laughter “ Hob-nail ” grunted out, “ Didst ever th’ see Jack Murrel grin through a horse-collar at the ‘ Barley Mow,’ Stoodley, eh ? ” ’

Then follows a minute description of the viands at that day’s dinner, with the remark, ‘ The popular dish, macaroni, as served by the Duke of York’s chef de cuisine—delicious ! ’

Also, ‘ My lord told Mr. William Throckmorton, in

my hearing, that when Hume and Lord Lyttelton ' (this must have been Thomas, the second baron, better known as the wicked Lord Lyttelton) ' were at the Hall they had a violent quarrel, in consequence of which "a meeting" was arranged at the kennels; "but," said he, "Nugent smoothed Tom's ruffled feathers, and his honour was carried to Halesowen that night, whilst I 'satisfied' Hume next day by letting him contradict everybody round the table." We had stewed eels, Severn lampreys, with a haunch of mutton wrapt in paste, boiled turkey, ham, and pastry, with cheese to follow.'

I now come to the careful entry in the diary which seems to have suggested the extraordinary expedition of Frank Chambers. Mark me, there is no date; but from the two entries immediately preceding—'Received a brace of pheasants from John Wilcox, of Wixford: first this season,' and 'Lord Hertford tells me of the serious illness of Mr. Millar, his son's old tutor'—we may reasonably fix the autumn of 1794. 'Sent for to Ragley Hall to converse with the Abbé Latour, who had just arrived from France with dismal accounts of the provinces. Fearful scenes, which I was able to confirm from my experience. Found that the Abbé knew Edgworth, Gardel, Rancourt, and Bertini, among former acquaintances of mine. We dined at six o'clock: everything pretty good, but not so well served as usual. Had to wait for hermitage. Besides Lord

Hertford and the ladies, met the Rev. Samuel Parr, two Mr. Conways, Mr. Ingram, also Captain Fortescue, Mr. Knight, Mr. Rudge, Joshua Jennings, and other neighbouring gentry. Dr. Parr very glum : sate with a large napkin under his chin, heeding nobody, and feeding as if the fellow had kept right off all the fasts in the calendar. . . . After dinner the conversation somehow turned upon the "Stratford Jubilee," and Captain Fortescue wondered if Shakespeare's image in the old church, especially the head, was really like him. "You had besth dig him up, John Fortescue," said Dr. Parr (who lisped, and called the poet Thackthpear); "may I be there to thee." Then Squire Moore mentioned that old Horace Walpole had offered, after the Jubilee, to give George Selwyn three hundred guineas if he could secure Shakespeare's head. Where-upon Parr remarked, "If he could thteal away hith brainth, that were cheap to him, thir." Afterwards I walked home beside the doctor's pony to Bartlam's. He was near being spilt opposite Griffith's at Arrow.'

CHAPTER II.

THE PLOT.

HERE we leave the diary for a time, and I quote from notes made after conversation with the late Mr. M., who often begged the recital of this singular exploit from his Uncle Chambers, and who himself transcribed in full some salient features of it. From which it appears that, upon returning home after the above dinner at Ragley, Frank Chambers pondered well how he could gratify his old inclination for adventure, and the liberal curiosity of the well-known curioso of Strawberry Hill. He then lodged at the surgery, a comely-looking house still standing at the corner of Malt Mill Lane, Alcester. It was built during the reign of Queen Anne by a branch of the Boteler family, whose arms—a chevron between three cups, as seen in the great east window of the chantry chapel attached to St. Milburge's at Wixford—were, until the door was renewed some fifty years ago, carved on an oval shield within the scroll pediment over the entrance.

Here, in a room on the first floor, still, I think,

bearing traces of old adornment, three men joined Chambers one night in the autumn of 1794. Their names were Cull, Dyer, and Hawtin, and they were supposed to call for some medicine for their wives. The only bottles on the table were, however, supplied by the near-hand 'Golden Cup,' and the medicines were of an extremely comfortable and exhilarating nature. Frank Chambers had some professional dealings with the men previously; and he used laughingly to regret that, with a large churchyard within a few feet of his own door, even then full to repletion, he had been obliged to further the interests of science at the expense of the disused humanity of a neighbouring parish, Alcester churchyard being too public for nocturnal visitations.

'It is not for that I want you,' he said, 'but to get at the skull of a chap who has been dead nearly two hundred years.'

'Why, you've got one as looks a thousan' year old already,' interposed Mr. Hawtin. 'There was a somewhat grim article of the kind nibbling the hard ledge of the high mantelpiece.'

'That's it, Jim; I want another to bear him company. The poor fellow finds it unked here o' nights since he was swinging free and easy on Mappleborough Green.'

'Well, young master,' exclaimed Harry Cull, 'I are game, so be these; where's the dig, and what's the shot?'

‘Stratford Church, and three pounds apiece for the job.’

‘With laps,’ put in Hawtin, who had at first hesitated about joining, and whose bibulous propensities were notorious.

‘Any quantity after it is over ; not a drop before,’ said Chambers.

‘I met these fellows at Stratford Church’ (writes the late Mr. M., from Frank Chambers’s dictation). ‘It is so long ago that I forget the exact date, yet I remember uncommonly well it was a near thing about getting there at all ; for just when I ought to have been setting off, old Grafton down the street took it into his head to have a fit, and as he was a capital patient, I had to remain by the bedside until the doctor returned from seeing Mistress Sarah Wilcox of More Hall. It was very dark, too ; and in my haste I pitched head-foremost over a footstone near the west door, and cut my nose. To my surprise I found Cull and Tom Dyer already hard on, whilst Hawtin scouted, shovelling the earth from the base of a new square tomb on the south side of the chancel, about ten yards from the small door.

“What the deuce are you at?” said I.

“Why, you see,” answered Dyer, “we warn’t agoin’ to wait here all night ; and this ’ere’s your mon, I reckon.”

‘What could the idiots be dreaming about? Their mistake was afterwards thus explained. I had mentioned to Hawtin (it must have been when I was top-heavy) that the skull I wished to secure at Stratford was that of one William Shakespeare. Now, Hawtin was sweet on a Stratford lass named Esther White, who lived in service at Parson Davenport’s, and went courting every Sunday. Like a fool, he told her our intention. He would have worked the oracle to better purpose could he have obtained the keys of the church. Hawtin, who was rather scared at the adventure, asked Esther if she knew anything about William Shakespeare. At first she could only call to mind an inn bearing that name; but at length she remembered a man asking to see master about a tomb to William Shakespeare, and she showed Hawtin where it was.

‘The maid’s memory was defective, and neither she nor Hawtin could read, or another name would have appeared, the tomb being really built over the remains of William Shakespeare Payton, a man well-known in Stratford, who died in the autumn a year or two before. Hawtin’s hesitation about the adventure had turned to eagerness when he conceived that this tomb would be the centre of our operations; and he was taken aback when I whispered to him that he had set his mates on the wrong scent.

‘“Put the soil back,” I said, “this is not the man; didn’t I tell you he was inside, and 200 years old.”

“Yes !” answered one, “but we thought that that was only your gammon.”

“So you wished to gammon me in return ; but now, my lads,” I continued, “sharp’s the word ; we have lost two hours already, and Battersbee, with his bull’s-eye, looks round sometimes.”

‘I thought we never should get inside that church. The windows were far above our heads, and well protected by stout stanchions. Dyer, who had served in a smithy, worked with a will at the lock of the chancel door, using the tools I had brought ; but those confounded old locks have a way of keeping close, and it would not yield. Farther down on the same side was a larger door of ribbed oak, and here Tom was making way when Hawtin scattered us with the caution, “Men among the trees.”

‘I crept round towards the porch, and, resting on a mound, I plainly heard footsteps on the broad flags in the avenue. I crept nearer. The overhanging boughs, with remnants of leaves, made it too dark to distinguish any form. I doubt if I could have seen a ghost ; but I was within a few feet of the heavy tread of a man, multiplied by Hawtin’s fears—a man, as shown by the voice, which was low and husky. He paced to and fro, the whole length of the avenue ; sometimes hurriedly, and then he would pause. Likely enough he had just left the public-house, for his speech was sometimes incoherent, and sometimes sadly too plain. He gave

vent to a deep trouble. His daughter, for he called passionately upon his child, had been buried here. A great wrong had been done, by whom I could not make out ; but he shook the gates angrily, and muttered three times, " I will—yes, I will !" Long afterwards I discovered that his anger had been justly caused by a lamentable occurrence at Bidford Grange. At length (it seemed an hour) he moved rapidly away ; and having reassured my companions, we returned to the charge. The door was soon opened, and, tinder-box in hand, we groped our way to the great chancel, and with considerable difficulty, for the letters were much worn, I singled out the slab, *then* about three feet by seven feet, which covers the remains of Shakespeare.

‘Hawtin waited on the outside, to throw a list ball against the windows in case of alarm, whilst Dyer and Cull, by the dim light of two curiously contrived lanterns, began to pick out the mortar dividing that slab from Thomas Nashe’s. Great care was necessary, that no trace of our search might remain.

‘As the men stealthily worked, the gloomy silence was quite chilling. Several times the woodwork in the high pews went off with a bang like a gum-tree ; and once I could almost have sworn that I heard a rumbling in the Clopton Chapel. When the stone was raised and placed on one side, there was very little masonry beneath, chiefly a thick layer of fine brown mould, mixed with woody fibre and fragments of glass,

which had been subject to the action of fire. There was evidence also of a previous disturbance, for, in addition to a circular piece of metal the size of a guinea, having on one side two crowns and a fleur-de-lis, and on the other a shield bearing three trees, and the name Ashwin beneath, we turned up a thigh-bone and finger-joints near the surface, and afterwards several teeth, with a knot of oak and a few attenuated nails with square heads.

‘But the most curious discovery was that of a ring, or fillet, probably of bronze, very much worn and indented, in which an inscription had been traced, the only legible part being, as I afterwards found, the half Roman letters, G U—L M—S (then follows a device like a sword), and a rude monogram, H. S. or I. H. S.

‘The men had dug to the depth of three feet, and I now watched narrowly, for, by the clogging of the darker earth, and that peculiar humid state—smell I can hardly call it—which sextons and earth-grubbers so well understand, I knew we were nearing the level where the body had formerly mouldered.

‘“No shovels but the hands,” I whispered, “and feel for a skull.”

‘There was a long pause as the fellows, sinking in the loose mould, slid their horny palms over fragments of bone. Presently, “I got him,” said Cull; “but he’s fine and heavy.”

‘Delving to the armpits with both hands, he tugged

for some seconds, and then brought up a huge grey stone, like that with which the church is built.

‘I began to be sceptical, when Tom Dyer, who was groping some two feet away from where the skull ought to have been, according to the position of the slab, came upon it, and lifted it out, diving again for the jaw.

‘I handled Shakespeare’s skull at last, and gazed at it only for a moment, for time was precious. It was smaller than I expected, and in formation not much like what I remembered of the effigy above our heads. At home I made a minute examination, the particulars of which, with other memoranda, were lent to Dr. Booker, of Alcester, and subsequently lost, much to my regret.

‘Then my men most carefully replaced the earth and stone, ramming all interstices with fragments of old mortar brought for the purpose. This, with a liberal sprinkling of dust, plentiful in the old church at that time, effectually concealed our depredations. My men were surprised at the care which I bestowed upon the venerable article. “Any skull from the charnel-house close by,” they remarked, “would have answered fully as well, without the labour.”

‘“Every man has his fancy,” I replied; “this is mine.”

‘When we reached Oversley Bridge, I gave them their money, and more; and a few hours afterwards paid for nine quarts of ale at the “Globe,” so that they seemed well satisfied with the night’s adventure.’

CHAPTER III.

THE RESULT.

‘My next step,’ continues Frank Chambers, ‘was to write in strict confidence to the much-talked-of Mr. Walpole, now Lord Orford. He had been lately staying with Marshal Conway during the latter’s illness, at Park Place, in Oxfordshire, and my letter followed him, and was answered from Berkeley Square.

‘He remembered the expression of his former keen interest in Shakespeare, politely appreciated my confidence and labours, and “would give all the skulls of his living relatives,” so he wrote, “to possess that of the deceased bard ;” but he offered no terms. Again I wrote. He replied that he had been ill, was worn to a skeleton, and at nearly four-score could not meet me in Warwickshire. Would I oblige him by coming to Strawberry Hill, and then all could be arranged.

‘Believing that he was shuffling, and desirous of peeping, without paying for the show, I stated my inability to comply with his request, and, reminding him of his old offer of 300 guineas for Shakespeare’s

skull, begged to know if he were still anxious to possess it.

‘There was further delay. At length he arranged to send down a confidant to treat with me for the treasure, and late one evening in December a message was left at my rooms from a Mr. Kirgall, or some such name, requesting to see me at the “Bear” Inn.’

(Then comes the interview, to which reference has been made.)

‘Upon entering the low-pitched room, a middle-aged man came forward, dressed in a manner antiquated even for those days. He was rather short, had weak eyes, and was deferential almost to timidity. He had been in Alcester, he said, many years before, and remembered as a lad taking down some figures with reference to a new church under the direction of his present employer and Colonel Conway; and had copied a design for a tower somewhere near. He was now sent to express his lordship’s pleasure and cordial congratulations at my success in securing the veritable skull of Shakespeare. Might he be allowed to inspect?’

‘I fetched it. Mr. Kirgall was in raptures. His lordship, who had kept our correspondence a profound secret, known only to two maiden ladies and the dear Duchess of Gloucester, would indeed rejoice to possess—the *loan* of it. Would I entrust it to his keeping? “At one price,” I rejoined, eventually reducing that price considerably.

‘The gentleman still dallied ; and, soon seeing that his errand was merely to obtain an unconditional loan of the article, I prepared to leave the room. He sought to detain me. Did I consider the risk of having a stolen skull ? The Earl did not wish to retain it for his own pleasure, but to show it to other people ; “besides,” he added, forgetting his diffidence, “it might not be genuine.” Here I stopped him. Finding that I was firm, and further parley on Lord Orford’s behalf useless, Mr. Kirgall sought to do a little business on his own account. Examining the skull and the jaw, which I had attached, he noticed that, whilst the molars had disappeared, there were several front teeth in a fair state of preservation, although loose from exposure. Might he extract one, only one ? he would fee me handsomely.

“All, or none,” I replied ; and, taking up the skull, I abruptly wished him good-night.

‘Putting my head out of the window early next morning to answer a call, I saw my dear friend holding the open door of the London coach opposite the “Angel,” and peering up and down the street. Perhaps he thought I should consider the matter more favourably at the last moment. He was mistaken. The coach rattled off, and Mr. Kirgall reached Berkeley Square on the morrow, minus one parcel.

‘The Reverend Samuel Parr, curate in charge of

Hatton, had shown the utmost reverence for the memory of Shakespeare; and a quaint drawing of New Place, Stratford, was entrusted to his care by Mr. Colmore, of Birmingham, after the recent riots. This I saw being framed at Twamley's, in Warwick, a few days after the interview with Kirgall; and I suddenly decided, being so near Hatton, to sound the doctor about purchasing so rare a memento of his idol. My excuse must be youth and innocence, and a scantily furnished pocket.

‘Leaving Pritchard to drive the hired gig back to Stratford, I had a brisk walk to Hatton, the moon just showing the hoar-frost on the ground. Thinking that the vicarage would be handy to the church, I made my way there, but could see no house. There was a faint light from the tower, for the men were ringing to call Christmas. I well remember listening beneath the belfry window, an unusually lofty one; and presently, when they paused, one man struck up the chorus of a carol which my old uncle sang at Studley when I was a child :

‘But Christmas then is Christmas now, though altered are the times,

When we sate up at midnight to hear the merry chimes.’

‘In a few minutes I found myself at the back of the vicarage. “This door will do as well as any other,” thought I; and I gave a sturdy rap.

“Come in—come in,” from a shrill voice, which I recognised, to my surprise, as the doctor’s.

‘Somewhat abashed at my intrusion, I entered the kitchen. There, on one side of the wide hearth, sat the little great man in a well-padded library-chair, with his right leg resting on a settle, at the extreme end of which was a wiry old man, in brown velvet waistcoat and nankeen breeches and gaiters, polishing a chain, evidently the man-of-all-work. On the opposite side were seated two gaunt female servants, not the least in awe of their learned master. The visitors were, a clergyman, not known, but I think from Tamworth, and my old acquaintance, John Bartlam.

‘Dr. Parr, who resembled a short-horned bull, wore a shabby skull-cap, which, being much too large, now and then slipped forwards and rested on his bushy eyebrows. He had no whiskers, and the eyes were very searching. He wore a loose coat with large buttons, black breeches, and ribbed worsted stockings, with broad buckles to his shoes. He looked what he desired to be—the old-fashioned country parson.

‘Laying down his pipe, he greeted me somewhat stiffly, but offered a bed. Waiting until the servants and the Tamworth visitor had retired, leaving the doctor and Mr. Bartlam over their grog, I ventured to hint at the object of my visit. Recalling a former conversation, I cautiously felt my way. If such an

article could be procured, would Dr. Parr like to possess Shakespeare's skull?

"How could he possess it?" he interposed testily; "it was in the grave, if anywhere."

'I continued: "If you, sir, would make it worth the risk, I happen to know——"

"Know what?" he shouted. "Has that fellow Garrick left it to his wife? He declared he would steal it at the Jubilee."

"Oh no!" I rejoined; "it is there—that is——" (with hesitation).

"Well then, sir, there let it be" (rolling out pompously), "'And curst be he that moves my bones.'" Afterwards he added severely, "Jack Bartlam, I would have any man whipt at the cart's tail who violated the sanctity of that grave: it would be worse than Malone or sacrilege."

'Seeing that I was utterly mistaken in my man, I changed the subject, and was relieved to get off to bed.

'In the morning, as I was leaving, Mr. Bartlam walked a little way with me. He said, "Chambers, you have that skull!" There was something about John Bartlam which forbade subterfuge. He was genial and kind, and withal loved a joke; so I told him. He became, however, very grave during the recital, and blamed me somewhat harshly, I then thought. He made me solemnly promise that the skull

should be restored ; and I (cursing my ill-luck more than my folly) walked on to Teddy Easthorpe's, at Stratford, who drove me home.'

'I repeatedly pressed my uncle,' writes the late Mr. M., 'to tell me whether the skull was ever really restored, and gleaned from him the following particulars :

'After waiting for the waning of that month's moon, Chambers had arranged with Tom Dyer to replace it one night in January, but was obliged to accompany his employer to Mr. Wilks's, at Coughton, to a case of compound fracture, whereupon Master Tom declared he could manage it all by himself, as he knew a way of getting into the church through the bone-house. The next day Dyer was paid, after taking an oath that he had buried the skull and made it all square, leaving no trace.

'On the following Sunday afternoon my uncle attended service at Stratford Church, on purpose to inspect the slab. There were no marks of a second upheaval, but there was an ominous crack right across the slab, about two feet from the end near the communion rails, and this might not long escape observation. To see Dyer was my uncle's first impulse, and he sought him early the next morning. He had gone to do some repairs at Welford Mill ; and, later in the day, my uncle, after calling upon a cousin (at Clifford, I believe),

traced Dyer to the little front parlour of the "Four Alls," near the bridge crossing the Avon.

'Tom, who was alone and drinking like a fish, at first protested that there was nothing up with the stone. After considerable evasion, he admitted that it was "a mighty dale heavier than he thought : that he had just lifted one end half an inch or so when it began to snap ; and to prevent further mischief he laid it down again."

' " You rascal ! then you never buried that skull ! "

' Tom declared, however, that the old chap was there beneath, as safe as a door-nail.'

' Again I asked my uncle, " Do you think that the skull was ever really restored ? " He was silent for a minute, and then quoted its owner for about the first time in his life :

' " 'Twere to consider too curiously to consider so. " '

*HOW SHAKESPEARE'S SKULL
WAS FOUND.*

HOW SHAKESPEARE'S SKULL WAS FOUND.

SINCE there appeared in the *Argosy* for October, 1879, the startling account of 'How Shakespeare's Skull was Stolen,' I, the Warwickshire man therein alluded to, have been beset with letters and queries from every conceivable quarter. Nor has the excitement abated. The proposed exhumation of Shakespeare's bones has revived the controversy. The above narrative has been copied in extenso in London and provincial papers. Dr. Ingleby has alluded to it in his recent work on 'Shakespeare's Bones;' and a whisper having been extensively circulated that I could reveal much more if I desired, I have been entreated from America and Germany especially to clear up the mystery by telling all I know. Fortunately I am able, after years of untiring research, to bring to light a series of facts almost stranger than fiction; and which facts prove conclusively that the skull of the immortal bard does *not* rest in the great chancel of Stratford Church.

How do I prove this ? I will tell you.

Among the cherished companions of the now notable Frank Chambers, at the beginning of this century, was Lieutenant J. L——, a young gentleman who seems to have found the presence of a stepmother so inimical to domestic peace that he preferred the more honourable warfare of serving on board His Britannic Majesty's ship *Goliath* against the French. During three or four years the correspondence between the friends was as regular and entertaining as that between Horace Walpole and Sir Horace Mann. Supplemented by other letters from Robert Bartlam and Thomas Hemming, they furnish an interesting picture of the social amenities of the fine old English gentleman, imbued with fine old English prejudices and full-bodied port, to be found in the venerable town of Alcester, eighty years ago. But the friendship between Frank Chambers and Lieutenant J. L—— suffered a sad eclipse in the memorable year 1804. The young soldier, impatient of the cautious hesitation of his commander, was at length allowed by Captain Brisbane to go with Lieutenant Kent, the first lieutenant of the ship, and endeavour to cut off a small vessel that was standing in shore. That vessel escaped their vigilance ; but, nothing daunted, they attacked a large brig, defended by French soldiers, and brought her out. Lieutenant L—— was dangerously wounded ; and then follows an episode which shows that the spirit of Sir Philip

Sidney still animates British hearts. For thus writes that ever courteous and chivalric gentleman—George Edward Roby, Captain, Royal Marines, to the afflicted father, under date of Jan. 8th, 1804 :

‘ It is impossible to do justice to your son’s greatness of mind, as the night it happened he refused to be dressed until a poor wounded marine soldier had first had assistance ; afterwards, of course, every attention was paid him by all his messmates, and the greatest care taken by the surgeon of him ; and we had the happiness, as we thought, of seeing him do well until the 23rd ult. at night, when the ship had a great deal of pitching motion, which unfortunately ruptured a very large bloodvessel, by which it was understood that death must in the end ensue ; this gave him time, poor dear fellow, to settle his affairs, and make his peace with the Almighty, which I assure you, sir, he did in the most sincere, manly and Christian-like manner possible, so that his resignation, fortitude, and patience became the astonishment of us all,’ etc.

Captain Roby afterwards sent the accoutrements and other property of his dear friend, amongst them that packet of letters which eventually came into my hands as the lieutenant’s direct descendant, and by which I am enabled, after much difficulty, to solve this startling mystery.

In those letters I had noticed allusions by Chambers to 'an unheard-of adventure,' 'a surprising visit,' 'something which must only be talked of betwixt you and me;' and yet three years afterwards this reluctance to particularize seems to grow less; and he writes on December 17th, 1803, 'I will send the strange account you ask for, to wait for you at Mr. Pitway's, Baldwine Gardens, Leather Lane, Holborn.'

That this 'strange account' could not mean the night adventure at Stratford Church I saw at a glance. That happened years before Lieutenant L. left Alcester; and, judging from his close intimacy with Chambers, would be well known to him. I could not help thinking that this obscure reference had something to do with the return of Shakespeare's skull. Once again, therefore, I carefully examined the numerous papers left by the late Mr. M. and the various memoranda of Frank Chambers, of which I have already made good use. There was no fresh discovery. I have also in my possession some books and papers left by the brother-in-law of Lieutenant L.—the very surgeon at Alcester with whom Chambers was long associated, and who, as persons there living may remember, was found dead one dark morning in Weethley Lane many years ago. There was one bulky packet, consisting apparently of pages torn from a professional day-book, going back to 1798; and this packet had been subjected to great pressure, for the leaves stuck together.

After unravelling some dozen, I came, to my surprise, upon three rambling letters in boyish roundhand to Chambers, detailing experiments made in a laboratory, signed Peter Woulfe; and then to a soiled pamphlet, 'The Jockey Club; a Sketch of the Manners of the Age,' inscribed 'Webb, Salford, 1793;' and last of all was a rough envelope, made from large-sized note paper, sealed with two common red wafers, eaten away by time. I trembled with excitement to see several sheets of manuscript in the well-known hand of Chambers, and within these was another leaflet, out of which dropt a small piece of bone.

Yes! a small piece of bone. I declare to you, that I have it before me as I write. Dark on the outside; slightly curved, of irregular outline, measuring two inches by one, and a quarter of an inch in its thickest part. I observed that it was formed of numberless tiny cells, and there was a coating of brown mould on the inside. Well! it was no unusual thing for a surgeon to possess a human skull; but why was this fragment so carefully secreted? I handled it reverently, for somehow I felt convinced that I should now clear up the mystery of 'Shakespeare's Skull.'

I at once examined the manuscript. It contained a startling adventure which could only happen to medical men nearly a hundred years ago; and which the writer, Frank Chambers, had probably intended to forward to Lieutenant L. had the latter lived. Every care had

been taken to conceal the locality ; and it will be seen shortly how I was able to identify it.

‘I had been sent for,’ writes Chambers, ‘on a cruelly cold night in December, to an outlandish parish. Heavy snow lay on the rough roads. This had thawed during the day, and was now set hard with a keen frost, so that it was near midnight before I could gain the top of the last hill. Leaving my gig at the small public, I walked to an old-fashioned house adjoining a churchyard, where the patient was said to be. I thumped at the doors, I threw jacky stones at the windows ; not a sound. “A pretty mess,” you will say.

““Why, Tom,” said I, as a man suddenly swept round the corner, with a “Hold on there!” “Why, Tom Dyer, is that you?”

““I knowed you’d come,” replied Tom, chuckling; “it bain’t thear, but up here,” jerking a finger towards the church.

““Now, measter ; me and my pal” (pointing towards a gaunt fellow in a tattered gabardine) “’ull pay you ’ansum, if you will follow us and doctor my sister, his missus ; but if you shine a light, or tell folks weer you a bin, by —— we’ll make you like these ere white stuns !”

““All right,” I whispered ; “don’t be a fool. You can’t show me greater secrets than I know already.” In fact, I felt more curious than fearful, remembering how

seldom a doctor comes to harm, even among foot-pads.

“I was sartin sure I could trust you,” continued Tom Dyer deferentially; “mind the brambles, sir.”

‘We had reached an angle of the church, formed by the jutting out of a tall building; and at the base, concealed by a thicket of gorse and thorns, was an irregular opening in the masonry, from whence came a ruddy light.

“Try back’ards, legs fust,” said Tom, as I sought in vain to wriggle myself through. After a hard struggle, I was down; whilst my companions, much larger men, slid through the opening like cats.

‘For a moment I was completely dazed by what I saw. Huge coffins partly covered with tattered cloth, and massive shields still bright, and on them grim helmets, gauntlets, and swords with glittering hilts, and crucifixes curiously wrought; whilst the near-hand niches were resplendent with costly urns, oval in shape, and richly chased, on one of which I read “CARISSIMUS, 1623.” All these were lighted up by a bronze lamp once used for a very different purpose, aided by glowing embers of charcoal in a brazier placed near a latticed door, through which the fumes passed under some steps into the empty church. This, then, was the spacious vault, nearly co-extensive with the chapel overhead, of the once wealthiest family in the Midlands. But I had no time for further thought. A woman,

prematurely old, and wrapped in a ragged hearse-cloth, lay moaning on a bench near the wall, to which a side had been roughly added from materials only too handy. She was badly burned in pear-like spots on the legs. "A sad misfortin to come so quick after getting here ; biling the kettle, and it tilted over," exclaimed the man who had not yet spoken.

'There was another fellow, about eighteen, perhaps the son, who sat in a narrow opening to a small chamber, swaying his legs and chewing tobacco.

' "Get down, Jim, and give the gentleman some rags," said the woman.

' "Let me help you," I exclaimed, as the sturdy youth, holding the lamp, thrust his body into the aperture, and stretched his hand towards a bundle of clothes. I leant over him, and any doubt as to the occupation of my companions was dispelled. On a square block of wood I saw a heap of dies and discs ; and near them rough counters, such as were formerly used as checks or passes in theatres ; clippers and iron bolts, with three or four packages like corn-samples neatly tied. I pretended to be too intent on the bandages to notice anything.

' "There," said I, rubbing in the salve, brought for the scald for which I had been summoned, "keep the skin moist, and put her in a sweat."

'I did *not* refuse a strong pull at the demijohn produced by Tom Dyer from among some iron pots, for

the closeness of the vault and the fumes of the charcoal nearly knocked me over; and yet stronger than all was the odour of incense, reminding me of Sundays at Abbeville. How could that smell arise?

‘I persuaded Tom to return with me to the surgery to bring back a noted palliative for burns which Sally Edkins had given me to settle her bill.

‘In the gig we spoke very little; but when we were slowly passing an old hall once belonging to our family, Tom, who had warmed with the liquor, began confidentially, “One good turn deserves another, doctor; and now I don’t mind a-telling you as how I was druv away in a fright from Stratford Church before I could bury that old skull; so, thinks I, as Measter Chambers seems so uncommon particular to have him under cover, I’ll just pop him into one of them wessels in this ere vault. And *that* I did, I’ll swear, last night; clipping this bit out on him to leave a kind of mark, d’ye see, for you to tell him by when you next comes to see my mate’s missus.”

‘To pitch the fellow out of the gig for his knavery was my first impulse, but my better judgment prevailed. I received the fragment in silence, inwardly vowing that the complete skull should be returned to its old resting-place at Stratford. After all, what could I expect from such a boor? That I was under peculiar obligations to him Tom knew well enough. I concealed my indignation, treated him to a bottle of

cockagee in the surgery, sent him back with the ointment, and promised to see the patient three nights hence.'

At this point, most provokingly, the narrative abruptly ends. Probably Frank Chambers was fearful of betraying the hiding-place of these unfortunates; one of whom I have identified as being defended by Campbell in 1814, and afterwards hung in chains near Stourbridge. There was reason for such fear, for, among the 160 offences at that time punishable with death, coining was especially noticeable. The culprit was at first strangled, and then the body thrust into the fire; but in the case of Phebe Harris, a few years earlier, the wretched woman, owing to the cruel blunder of the executioner, was tossed alive into the flames.

After reading the manuscript, I sought for further explanation in the leaflet wrapped round the relic. The handwriting was Chambers's, merely part of a bill:

‘Dr. to Thomas Dyer.

For refixing clapper of new bell ... 4s. 3d.

For seeing to stays and clips 3s. 8d.

The rest had gone. I saw at once that, Dyer being illiterate, the doctor had made out a bill for him which had not been used. I then surmised that Shakespeare's skull had not been replaced in the grave at Stratford; and I was intensely eager to trace its whereabouts.

Every name and date had been cautiously concealed ; but fortunately I have a faculty for analysis, and readily drew my own conclusions.

Of the several parishes visited within an easy drive of Alcester, Studley at first claimed my attention for three reasons : the solitary situation of its church ; the stately manor house, once belonging to the Chamberses, skirting the high-road ; and the fact that Frank's young cousin, afterwards curate of the parish, lodged at Hardwick ; but I found nothing to correspond with a large mortuary chapel. So also at the 'outlandish' parish of Ipsley. I saw the 'plain farmhouse, close to the church,' mentioned by Chambers in his diary, and 'the dilapidated glebe-house,' still standing as in his day ; but I looked in vain for the 'small public,' or for any imposing vault of the great family of Huband, so long lords of the surrounding soil. After a week's fruitless search, I was driving one afternoon along the Alcester and Birmingham road, when my pony cast a shoe, just opposite the quaint mansion half-way up Gorcote Hill. Sending the animal to a smithy, I was not sorry to call at a house which, as a child, I associated with the Dingley Dell of 'Pickwick.' The great hall, with long oaken tables, and the ancient dais still remaining ; the deeply mullioned windows with remnants of stained glass, and the panelled parlour beyond, where hang in courtly robes the faded portraits of forgotten squires and dames.

‘ Who are these ?’ I asked.

‘ My grandfather used to say,’ replied the venerable tenant, Mr. Aldington, ‘ that they were a family named Chambers.’

‘ Did they own this place?’

‘ I never heard so, and I have been here over fifty years ; but I do remember, as a lad, seeing scrawled on a loose pane in the window over the porch :

“ When five generations have come and gone,
Then Will Chambers’s heir shall have his own.” ’

I was delighted with the discovery : for this must be the old hall alluded to by the doctor, and I was on the right track at last.

I continued my journey, and leaving the main road at the Bowling Green Inn, I found myself, one quarter of an hour later, close to a venerable church, placed at an elevation commanding most extensive views of the country around. An old man (not the sexton) was trimming a grave, and the tower-door was open. There was a neat residence adjoining the road south of the church.

‘ That,’ said the old man, ‘ is where the “ public ” stood, and the wardens cast up their accounts : a great place for cock-fighting when Master Batten kep’ it ; but it was before my day.’

‘ Is that the Vicarage?’ I inquired, pointing to a white house close to the churchyard.

‘ Yes, sir : that’s where the parson lives.’

So far the evidence was cumulative. Only one point puzzled me. It is plain, from his description, that Chambers came and returned by way of Gorcott Hill ; but a moment's reflection convinced me that the state of the roads caused him to choose the longer road as the best—perhaps the only one passable.

When opposite the tower, I turned to the left ; and, sure enough, parallel with the chancel was a lofty building projecting ten feet from the north aisle. In the corner thus formed all bushes had disappeared with the advent of rural deans ; but I saw at once that a rough opening eighteen inches square at the base of the projecting stonework had been recently filled in.

‘Ah, yes !’ replied my informant, ‘there used to be a grating to air the vault, till the bars got stole ; and then, I’ve heard say as old Thomas Moore filled it up at the burial of Madam Sheldon, seventy years ago.’

‘Were they Romanists ?’ I eagerly asked.

‘No !—the old uns was born and bred in the parish.’

Leaving the patriarch somewhat astonished at my impetuosity, I hurriedly passed through the tower to the end of the north aisle, and I found myself in a remarkable mortuary chapel, surrounded by magnificent tombs under canopies, and costly tablets of the once notable Sheldons.

There needed not the ‘R.I.P.’ below the inscriptions to show their form of faith ; for under the great east

window (blocked with monuments since mass ceased to be celebrated by Father Bruck) stands *in situ* the beautiful altar placed there even so late as 1560 : a gift from the then Pope to the head of the Sheldon family. I stamped with my foot ; all was hollow save the space sixteen feet by six round the altar. The chapel is three feet above the level of the north aisle ; and under the steps leading thereto I carefully noticed the entrance to the vault, through a door rotten with damp and age.

Ascending the tower, I discovered the inscription on the latest bell to be : ' WILLM. PITTS AND THOS. WINTERTON, CHURCHWARDENS 1789. JNO. RUDHALL, FECT.'

I then examined, by permission of the vicar, the churchwardens and constables' accounts ; or rather, sundry crumbling portions of them, going back to 1658 ; and my conclusions were singularly confirmed by this entry, under 1799 : ' Paid to Thomas Dyer of Aulcester, for repairing new bell, as per bill, 0 17s. 3d.'

That this is also the year in which Frank Chambers visited the vault is evident from the fact that he alludes to the house adjoining the churchyard being vacant ; and certain entries imply, if they do not actually prove, that, upon the death of the occupier, the Reverend William Brittain, in December, 1799, the vicarage-house was void for some months, until the appointment of Dr. Samuel Parr's favourite pupil—the Reverend John Bartlam, in the following year.

Christmas at midnight in an old church. With a faithful confidant and dark lanterns like Guido Faux, we raised the framework of the steps, and squeezing through the aperture, felt our way down the corresponding steps leading to the vault. As I expected, the heavy door yielded to momentary pressure—in fact, it had already been displaced. I confess, that notwithstanding the laudable intention of my enterprise, I felt squeamish, and my breath came short and quick, as I and my companion stood at this solemn hour in the presence of so much death. Even the remembrance that ‘the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures,’ almost failed to screw one’s ‘courage to the sticking-place.’ The lanterns threw a ghastly gleam on the numerous *open* coffins, and I noticed, terror-struck, that some had struggled in their sleep; and some were half-raised; and some, perfect in outline, were swathed tightly in cerecloth, looking as if they had turned to marble from so long waiting with affright in the awful darkness. I examined more closely, and found that many of the older coffins had been rifled; whilst one delicate form, still bearing the sweet odours of foreign embalming, being probably that of Mary Sheldon, nun at Louvain, had been wantonly mutilated. The leaden shells were doubtless melted by the coiners, and the lids of the outer coffins of oak were taken perchance by reason of their rich emblazonry. Helmet and sword had vanished, but here

and there was a rusty gauntlet, and crucifixes of solid silver of exquisite workmanship lay upon the breasts of the sleepers.

Thank goodness, superstitious fear had preserved *them!* Frank Chambers must have been mistaken as to the niches, for I found no trace of such ; and where were the costly urns ? At the head of the embalmed body of 'The Right Honourable Lady Marie, wife to the Right Worshipful Ralph Sheldon, Esq.' (whose mysterious death in London at the house of her father, Lord Rivers, in 1623, caused such a stir at the time), was a plain bracket and a phial, probably of holy water ; and near the immense coffin of Ralph Sheldon, the last of the family, who was brought from Donnington Park, Berkshire, in 1822, the wall was blackened by the action of fire. We trod upon a yielding mass of decayed wood, mixed with nails and fragments of escutcheons silver gilt, showing how many generations had been here magnificently interred, even since that imposing pageantry which marked the obsequies of the renowned William Sheldon, on January 15th, 1571, when Robert Cooke, Esq., and other heralds came down from London to fix helmet, and sword, and rich achievement against the chapel walls, and to pronounce with pompous eulogy the worth and titles of the deceased. At a sight so weirdly impressive as this spacious vault at midnight, I forgot for the moment the object of my search ; and when I looked round the

naked walls, my heart sank at the idea that the precious skull had been lost beyond recovery. There was, however, one hope. At the foot of an ancient coffin, on which was written below a shield bearing three sheldrakes, 'RALPH SHELDON DEPARTED THIS LIFE ON TUESDAY THE 24TH OF JUNE ANNO DOM. 1684, ON WHOSE SOUL GOD HAVE MERCY, AMEN. ÆTAT SVÆ, 60' (that steadfast loyalist, whose concise epitaph, 'Quondam Radulphus Sheldon Nunc Cinis, Pulvis, Nihil,' startles all readers), I discovered the narrow opening into another chamber described by the doctor. It was just beneath the remarkable effigies of William and Elizabeth Sheldon; and doubtless once contained their dust. But it had long been used as an ossuary; and all that I could at first see, when I had squeezed half my body through the slit, was a heap of gigantic bones, which, when padded with sinew and flesh, must have cracked many a skull on Bosworth Field. Yet stop! in the corner nearest to me, so near that by lying flat I could clutch the rim with my left hand, was a plain earthenware vessel, in shape like a kettledrum, and once hermetically sealed with the like cerecloth which envelopes the Lady Marie. With nervous energy I dragged the heavy jar to the larger vault. The cover had been rudely rent, and the viscera of the Right Worshipful Ralph had dissolved into a sediment of dark mud, which was mingled with clippings and rude pellets of

lead ; but, 'Oh rapture !' resting on these was an undersized skull, with a prominent forehead marred by a jagged hole. Over that hole I placed the fragment I had brought with me : it fitted *exactly* ! THE VERITABLE SKULL OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE WAS THERE.

THE END.

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